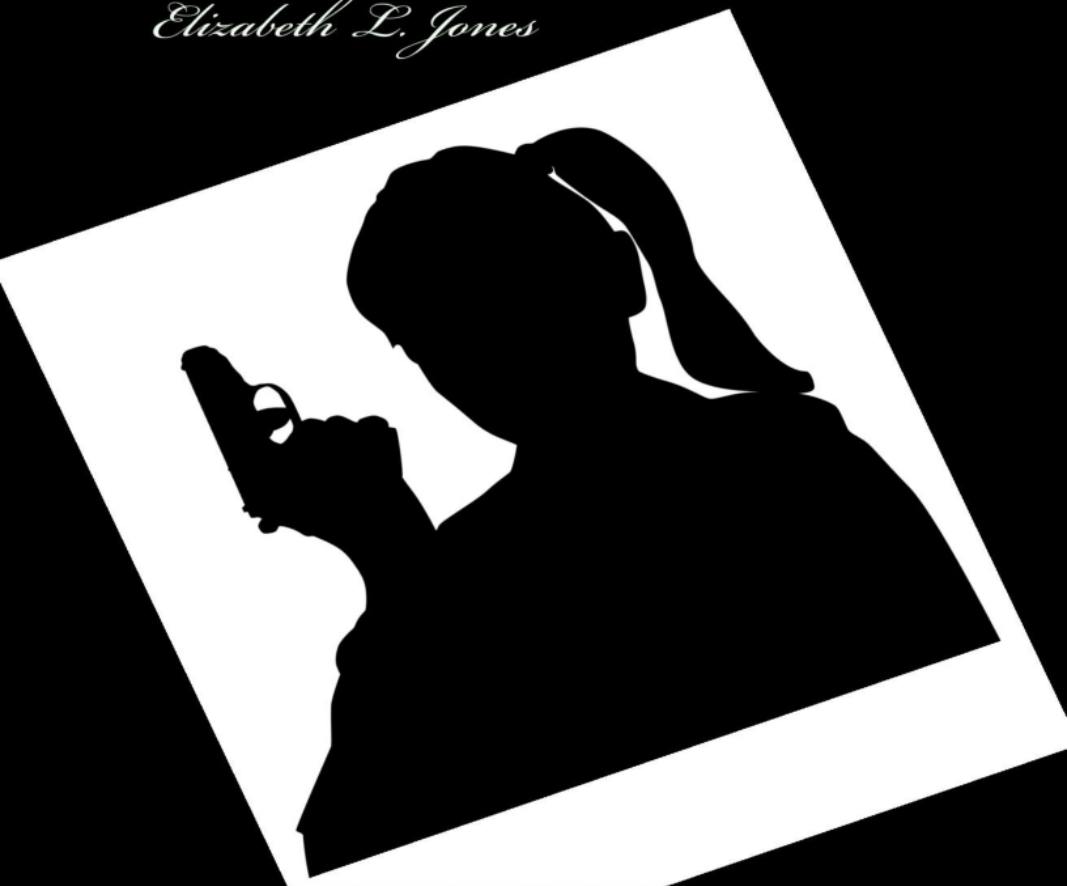
Elizabeth L. Jones



Apocalypse Mom

Diary of an Ordinary Woman in a Not So Ordinary World

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The Diary of an Ordinary Woman
In a Not So Ordinary World

Elizabeth L. Jones

For my very own Apocalypse Mom ~
Love you bunches!

To the folks at Prepared Society ~
Thanks for reading all my stories!

October 26, 2015

I admit it. I was one of those people who cheered when the hurricane turned in her direction, who watched disaster movies and read post-apocalyptic books by the dozens and who secretly hoped for The End Of The World As We Know It. Now that it's here, I feel kind of stupid. I'm not even sure why I'm writing this down, as it's doubtful anyone will ever read it. Then again, who knows? Weirder things have obviously happened.

It started on a Tuesday, a normal old boring not-your-dreaded-Monday but not quite to hump-day Tuesday. I had the morning off, so after schlepping the kids to the bus stop at the ungodly awful hour of 6:00am, I dashed home to crawl back under the covers for a few more hours of stolen zzzz's. I'm ashamed to say that when the hubby snuggled close looking for a little lovin' before heading into the office, I pretended to snore. Wish I hadn't done that now, since he never came home.

My first clue that something was wrong? I honestly don't remember. Let's see…I remember waking up with bright sunlight streaming in through the curtains we never remembered to close (which I'm sure used to give our neighbors who knows how many impromptu peep shows) and stretching. I remember feeling contented and relaxed until an internal clock jolted me out of bed and had me grabbing for my cell phone to see exactly how late I was for work. Only it was dead. Oh, I did the whole pushing buttons, then pushing them harder, then holding them down for a while thing, but it didn't do any good. I even plugged it into the charger. I'm ashamed to say it took me a good ten minutes to realize it wasn't charging because the power was out.

At this point I still wasn't too worried. I climbed out of bed and scrambled into my scrubs while booting up the laptop. Yeah, it didn't work either. I was maybe a little more concerned now, but not overly so. We were always running everything down to no battery, so it really wasn't that unusual. I was pretty sure I was late for work, but figuring I had a good excuse, I took my time, grabbing something to eat, putting on makeup, braiding my hair, and digging through the dryer for my favorite socks. Boy, do I feel dumb. Climbing in my 2008 dinged up minivan (the kind the kids ask you to park at the back

of the lot) I turned the ignition, staring at the dash. I was still worried about the damn time, but since the car didn't start either, I got unworried about it real quick. I suppose this is where I clued in that something was wrong.

Now is the time where I would love to tell you that I grabbed my well stocked bug-out bag (of course I know what that is, I told you I read post-apocalyptic fiction), strapped on my gun and well-broken in hiking boots and trekked heroically across town to rescue my children in record time. Or better yet, I ran and got our pre-1970 salvaged military vehicle and drove off, patting myself on the back for our foresight. Didn't exactly happen that way. Oh I knew what a bug-out bag was, and I even had one. But let's face it; I was a middle-aged mother of three. I was out of shape, overweight and hadn't owned a pair of hiking boots since 1995. We'd never had the money to get an older car, even though we had wanted to, and the only bicycle we had belonged to my eleven-year-old, and it had a flat.

But a mother worried about her children is a force of nature, so I knew I had to do something. By now, I had a pretty good idea what was going on, and I was determined to go get them. Going back inside, I put on jeans, a t-shirt and my good pair of athletic shoes. I did have both a decent gun (Ruger .22) and a couple good knives (Bark River Gunny and a Boker Kalishnikov), but I was woefully lacking in practice with both. I managed to find about ten extra rounds for the gun, attached everything to my belt, and pulled on a sweatshirt to cover it all. My bag was an old hiking backpack and had a change of clothes, a small first aid kit, toilet paper (what?), a solar flashlight, compass, paracord, Lifestraw water filter, Nalgene canteen, several energy bars, and a fire kit inside. The fire kit was my favorite part, and probably the only part I was decently familiar with. It had a small amount of linen tow, some char cloth, a beeswax candle stub, some matches, a lighter, a ferrocerium rod and striker, flint and steel, and a small pill vial full of Vaseline soaked cotton balls. I liked fire.

I had always told my kids to stay put if something weird ever happened, so I knew I had to go get them. Fortunately they were all at the same school. Unfortunately it was one of the local magnet schools, and a good fifteen miles away. So, after grabbing one of my husband's walking staffs from the hall closet and plunking a ball cap on my head, out the door I went. Then I went right back in, left the dogs and cats extra food and water, wrote a note for my husband and packed several sandwiches. Then off I went again. I will admit that I took my cell phone with me. Stupid, in retrospect, but just in case everything started working again I wanted it with me. Then I could call someone to come pick up my over-reacting self.

Now, in my neighborhood it wasn't immediately noticeable that

anything was wrong. We live in a typical middle class subdivision, three bedroom ranch style homes sitting on half-acre lots. We're not the kind of neighborhood where you see a lot of junked up cars on blocks, but we don't get nasty letters in our mailboxes if the yard isn't cut either. This time of day most people were gone to work, school, or just out and about. The elderly couple on the corner was sitting out on their front porch and waved as I went by, but I didn't stop to talk. The main road was a different story. From the end of my street I could see several stalled cars in both directions. People were still sitting in them or standing beside them, so I guessed not too much time had passed. I turned east, headed in the direction of the road that would take me almost directly to the school.

We are just on the outskirts of the city of Mobile, Alabama, and to reach my kids I would have to travel through most of it. Typically, it's pretty laid back, but I wasn't counting on this being typical. By the time I reached the gas station on the corner, I was out of breath. There were only about four cars there, and everybody was crowded around the front door, even the cashiers. They all seemed concerned, but nobody was panicky yet. Turns out I was right about the time, whatever caused all this had only happened about an hour ago. Believe it or not I actually had cash on me and was able to buy several bottles of water, some granola bars and other miscellaneous snacks.

One of the other customers, a nice looking guy in a cable company uniform, said he lived not too far down the road, in one of those subdivisions so big you get lost in. He asked if he could walk with me and since he seemed normal enough, I figured what the hell. I mentioned before it's a long road, that runs pretty much north-south through the west side of town. My end of it is mostly just trees, then eventually subdivisions, interspersed with the prerequisite Dollar General and random nail salon. Oddly enough, there is a sidewalk running along its length, and though I suppose I could've danced down the middle of the road if I wanted, I stuck to it. It took a long time to reach his neighborhood. Thankfully I didn't have a watch (and his wasn't working) so I can't berate myself down to the minute, but I can say that the sun had gone from mid-morning height to straight up by the time we got there.

We didn't talk much, which was good since I was working on breathing, but it was nice to have the company. When we stopped at the entrance to his neighborhood, he looked over at me. He had this thoughtful look on his face so I just finally asked him what was up. He stood there for another minute before finally speaking.

"How far do you have to go?"

"About ten miles, give or take. All they way down to Old Shell

Rd."

"If you're interested, my wife has an old bike in the garage you can have. It's not the best, but it would get you there faster."

Ok..ok..I know what you're thinking. Dumb chick follows stranger to his house with promise of bicycle and ends up dead in his crawlspace. I thought it too. Two things made me take him up on his offer. One, I had a gun. I know I said I was lacking in practice for it, but I still knew how to shoot the damn thing. Two, I was starting to freak over the long, hard walk to my children and this guy was standing here offering me a way to get to them faster. He could have been wearing a shirt that said "serial killer in training" and I probably still would have gladly followed him home.

As it was, he was sincere and I rode away the proud owner of a 1970 something yellow ten-speed. I will also point out here that paracord IS useful, as I had to use it to tie the walking staff across my back. No way was I leaving that behind; it's hard to find a weapon and walking assistant all in one. I was now feeling a little optimistic. Until I realized I had to pee. After thinking about it for a minute, I decided I should take advantage of the fact that the plumbing probably still worked and I actually rolled the bike right through the front doors of the Circle K on the edge of his neighborhood and locked it in the bathroom with me. The cashier looked at me funny, but in all honesty, I don't think she cared. I was actually surprised she was still there. Of course, when she smiled sweetly and told me cash only, no change, and slipped my twenty into her pocket, I figured she was making a killing.

Loaded up with fresh water bottles and some candy bars, I pedaled off into the sunset. I'm kidding. I wobbled off into the hot midday sun is more like it. Do you know how hard it is to ride a bike with a heavy backpack and giant staff on your back? Anyways, since I had finally caught on that something weird was going on, I decided to skip the rest of this road, seeing as on a good day the traffic was unbearable, and detour through some neighborhoods. It was nice and quiet, and if I hadn't been so out of shape, it probably wouldn't be so damn hard. As it was, I had to get off and push up several measly inclines that I'm sure a two-year old could've made on a tricycle. I did pass lots of people once I came out on another main road, mostly stuck in parking lots. I must have looked like I knew what I was doing, since several of them called out to ask what was going on. I just played dumb and kept moving; seemed the safest bet. In all those books I read society would start to break down inside of an hour and I fully expected someone to try and knock me down and take the bike, but it didn't happen. Everybody was either too in denial or too worried about their own problems to bother me, and that suited me

just fine.

I was going through the water at this point, which made me a little nervous. I did have water purification tablets in addition to the Lifestraw (though I wasn't a hundred percent sure how to use either one), and at the rate I was consuming it, I'd be breaking them out before long so I could refill at a water hose. Turns out I got to hold on to them. I stopped at one of the local parks to hunt down a water fountain or sink or something, but apparently someone else had gotten thirsty too. There was a soda machine at the bathroom entrance that had been broken open. Oddly enough, all the soft drinks were gone, but there was plenty of water left, so I helped myself and kept going. And going. I passed the huge library, which had a parking lot full of useless cars. No people though. Maybe they were all busy reading. I had also noticed an increase in the number of cars stalled in the road, which made sense, as I was approaching the city's busiest thoroughfare. This is, of course, where I saw my first car accidents. It made sense there would be some, but I hadn't seen any yet so it was still a shock. There were four of them, and I couldn't really tell where one stopped and another began. I did feel bad for the poor guy still stuck in his car. He was alive, and appeared to be not too badly hurt. He had a cut over his eye and a ton of blood in his hair and on his face, though it did look like either he or someone else had made an effort to clean it off.

I'd always considered myself tough. Maybe not physically, but mentally and emotionally. I had my first child at 23, a set of twins at 25, and found myself a single mom five weeks after their arrival. Husband number one had found himself a girlfriend at some point while I was busy juggling a toddler and a giant tummy full of babies. Turns out she was pregnant too (isn't life a riot?) and he chose her. Don't get me wrong, I'm not bitter. It wasn't easy, or happy, but I eventually found my current husband and I like him better anyway. The point is, I didn't consider myself a wimp, but instead of heading over to see if I could help, I steered around him. I told myself that there were already plenty of people around him, and there wasn't anything I could do anyway, and felt a little better. The real reason I suppose is that I was so focused on getting to my kids I just didn't want to take the time to stop. I'll admit, I was surprised no one had tried to stop me, but maybe since it hadn't been very long everyone still felt all constricted by society norms….I didn't figure it could last long. It didn't.

The next intersection was that major one I told you about. Grocery Superstore on one side, bank on another, and nearly identical restaurants on the other two. The restaurants had empty parking lots, but I had to choose whether I should pass closer to the bank or the

store. Neither one really appealed to me, but the best I could tell from where I sat was that the bank was quieter, there seemed to be large crowds around the doors to the grocery store, and I don't like large crowds on the best of days. It was harder than it looked to weave around the stalled cars, several of which were smashed together in a tangled, metal mess. I eventually made it, and I'm glad I chose the bank side because I was only halfway across their parking lot when the sound of breaking glass and angry voices drifted across the street. I stopped automatically to look and was amazed when about two seconds later the crowds all started surging into the store. I realized I had been sitting still too long when people started exiting again, running off in the direction of God knows where carrying bags of God knows what. I'm pretty sure I saw one person dart across the street carrying an armful of steaks, all nice and wrapped up in their pretty styrofoam containers. A few more shouts and an ear-splitting scream propelled me to get moving again, and in just a few minutes, most of the chaos had faded behind me.

I must have been making better time than I thought (and I wasn't even too winded, although I'm sure my leg muscles would be complaining tomorrow) because the sun really hadn't moved much since I left the gas station and I only had a few miles to go. I passed a McDonald's, and (you're going to laugh at this part) I swear to you there were people lined up out the door. At McDonald's. I may not be a genius or anything, but I have to say if the cars quit working, electricity goes kaput, and communications are non-existent, Mickey D's would not be the first (or second...or seven hundred and fifty-ninth) place I would go. I may not have been as prepared as I would like, or as skilled as I would like, or as in shape as I would like, but I had a pretty good idea what was going on.

The best I could figure was some kind of EMP (electromagnetic pulse) or CME (coronal mass ejection). I admit to being a bit confused, as I had always thought that an EMP would have caused transformers to blow up, and I hadn't seen any of that, and I didn't think a CME would be strong enough to disable cars, but I wasn't a scientist, and I was just guessing. At any rate, I just shook my head and kept on pedaling.

I reached the school probably not too long after what would have been normal dismissal time, if anything about this day had been normal. The school sat off by itself with not too much around it, and looked perfectly normal as I approached it. The doors, of course, were locked. This didn't bother me, as I would rather my kids be locked inside safe, but I didn't come all this way to be deterred. I banged on the door. Then banged some more. Eventually someone I recognized as the principal appeared in the little rectangular window. I'm not

sure if I was relieved or annoyed that she knew who I was right away. I mean, are my kids that bad? Granted, I have had to call the school several times for minor things, and there was that one time we had to meet when one of the twins had his pants stolen (yes, pants...a story for another day). But at least she let me in, just as calm as could be.

"Mrs. Campbell," she said politely, "I'm glad to see you. You're only one of fifteen or so parents to make it here."

So this surprised me...I thought there'd be more, as slow as I was. Go figure. Anyway, she let me in and pointed me towards the cafeteria, where all three of my kids were. Apparently, they'd tried to keep them in class groups, but several of the teachers had split and they'd had to resort to putting the entire sixth grade in the cafeteria. My daughter, who was in seventh, had begged and pestered until they let her join her brothers. This made me proud. Annoyed the staff I'm sure, but made me proud none the less. I parked my bicycle just outside the cafeteria doors, in the school foyer (Do you see the mistake here? You will.) and headed inside.

It struck me quite a bit later that I hadn't told the principal if I was taking the kids or staying here with them, and she hadn't asked. I took it to mean she didn't mind either way, but I've always had a hard time just "going with the flow" and, once I realized it, I went off in search of her. Not that my kids and the plethora of other chattering (and complaining) middle schoolers were annoying me or anything. Just saying. Turns out she was quite happy that I wanted to stay the night. Even more staff had vacated the premises while I'd been sitting with my children and she could use the extra eyes (and stern voice). The kids themselves seemed pretty unconcerned with what may or may not be occurring outside the school walls. They seemed to be treating the whole thing like a giant slumber party. In fact, so much so that we had to separate the boys and girls, first to opposite sides of the room, then to completely different rooms. This is a good stopping point for the night. More tomorrow.

Ellie

October 27, 2015

So, we spent the night at the middle school. I will say that I didn't get much sleep. And not due to the incessant whispering, giggling and chattering of the kids either. Even over them, I could hear occasional gunshots, and they didn't sound that far off either. This worried me, and my original "maybe this won't be so bad" outlook was taking a sharp hit. I guess now is as good as time as any to tell you about my kids.

I mentioned I have three. Kelly is thirteen going on thirty-five. She's smart, beautiful and should probably be locked in a closet until she turns eighteen. Her hobbies seem to be make-up, boys, boy bands and quietly pestering her brothers until they explode. She's not a bad kid, or as shallow as I made it sound. She's also always willing to help out, no matter how much she really doesn't want to. She watches out for her brothers and while middle school hasn't been a basket of roses so far...or wait, maybe it has...if they're roses that have thorns that sometimes pop up and prick you…. Anyway, you get the point.

Her brothers, Jackson and Arnold, are twins, and at twelve, they are what you would expect a boy that age to be. They hadn't quite figured out that only doing something halfway would mean redoing it, and they seemed to have a deficiency where dirty clothes were concerned. But they were good kids too, and I knew just how lucky I was.

So fast forward to the next morning. I was a little (ok, a lot) nervous about leaving, but I figured the earlier the better (thugs sleep in, right?) so I rousted the kids, said goodbye to the principal, thanked the brilliant person who'd put ibuprofen (the hubby) in my first aid kit (biking is NOT merciful to under used leg muscles), and was debating what to do with four people and one bike when the problem solved itself. Remember that mistake I mentioned earlier? That would be leaving it unlocked and out of my sight. Someone stole it. I was

annoyed, but not all that surprised, and since it solved my problem, we just decided to walk. Now I will admit to snitching some snacks and water bottles out of the teacher's lounge. It's not like I cleaned them out and left poor starving children to die. I just filled up my kid's backpacks. I may have also added some toilet paper, sanitizer and other goodies. Sue me.

It was barely light when we left, and the streets seemed quiet. Well, at least until we stepped onto them. You know what happens when you wake up three kids, feed them only milk and day old fruit cocktail and drag them outside for a long walk at daybreak? Bickering. Lots of bickering. The first couple of miles went something like this:

Kelly: "Mom! Jackson's stepping on my heels!"

Jackson: "Not on purpose, she's just not walking fast enough."

Me: "Switch places."

Arnold: "Mom! Kelly's walking too slow!"

Kelly: "I am not!"

Jackson: "I'm hungry; can I have a granola bar?"

Kelly and Arnold: "Me too!"

Me: "Maybe McDonald's is open. If you talk loud enough I'm sure the guys with the guns from last night will meet us with some sausage biscuits."

Apparently they had some grasp of the situation (and sarcasm), because they all stopped, looked at me funny, and then resumed walking, only much more quietly.

The trip went pretty well, albeit slower than on a bike, but eventually we reached the intersection with the grocery store. I was uneasy, after the looting I saw yesterday, but everything seemed empty and calm, so we took the shortcut through the grocery store parking lot. Mistake.

As we were passing what in retrospect I realize was way too close to the front doors, a guy stepped out of the shadows to block our path. He seemed pretty normal to look at him, khakis, white button-up, boat shoes, you know the type. Of course, he was bleeding and he'd been hanging out in the dark entrance of a busted up grocery store, so maybe not so much. What happened next was just weird. He smiled. I remember that. Then he spoke.

"Hey there. I was wondering if you guys could help me out. I need to get home, and would really like to travel with someone."

Sounds normal, right? But for some reason, it just creeped me out. So I declined. I'm guessing he didn't like rejection, since his happy face went away and now he seemed a bit angry. I'd been slowly backing up, and bless those kids, they were backing right along behind me, no bickering at all about who was stepping on who. So

here's where it went from weird to surreal.

Creepy guy steps toward me and I pulled my pistol. No, it wasn't an ingrained reaction or anything; I had to make a conscious decision to draw the weapon and point it at someone; I just made it very quickly. It seemed to help, as he saw the gun and backed up. He seemed to think about it for a second and then took a small step forward, probably figuring I wouldn't fire. I was shaking so bad I'm not sure that I actually meant to fire, and I certainly didn't hit him. It served its purpose though, as he decided I was too much damn trouble, and turned and disappeared back into the store.

The kids and I? We so went the other way. We had crossed the boulevard at a run and were on the backside of one of those restaurants when I felt something burning my chest. Oh, I didn't do anything as dumb as shoot myself. I did however manage to eject a spent bullet casing down my shirt, where it had become lodged right between my boobs, stuck in my bra. Can you say ouch? After I did a did a spastic little jig to get it out, apparently making the kids feel better as they all laughed at me, we kept going. I had that cute little bullet burn for days…perfectly shaped and everything. Of course, it served a purpose, reminding me that things had changed and it was now my job to be more aware; I had not just me, but three kids to protect. I wouldn't make the same mistake again. It's late and I'm exhausted now, so I'll finish the story of our trip home tomorrow.

Ellie

October 28, 2015

So, where was I? Oh yes, Bullet Booby Burn. Not recommended. We didn't spend too much time hunkered down behind the restaurant dumpster before setting off again. We were all thirsty and tired, but I wanted to get us further away from the intersection before stopping for a break. After some synchronous whining from the kids, I stopped long enough for them to pull out water bottles to carry. Drinking while we walked was all I was willing

to concede.

If it wasn't for all the stalled cars, it really would have been a lovely morning. The air was spectacularly crisp and the sky had broken a clear and peaceful blue. It looked to be shaping into the kind of fall day that doesn't happen all that often in southern Alabama. Usually we went from a wet heat that would be right at home in Satan's bathtub to air that was just cold enough to frost your windshields, skipping right over those pesky seasons of Spring and Fall. I figured at least if we had to be walking, we could pretend it was a nature hike instead of the apocalypse (albeit a nerve-wracking one).

The kids had a much easier time keeping up the pace than I did, and the next four rest breaks could be completely blamed on me. My legs were cramping, my feet were aching in my expensive athletic shoes, and I was tired. But more than that? I wanted to get us home, so I kept going. Home stood for safety and comfort, and at that point I was hoping we'd arrive victoriously to find my husband waiting with open arms. Hope is a great thing. Or for sissies. Not sure which.

We were being more cautious now, staying to the side of the road, and the kids were so exhausted they weren't even arguing anymore. It was quiet outside, eerily so. No humming power, no cars, not much noise at all. Maybe that's why the gunshots seemed so loud, so harsh. There were two, coming from somewhere in front of us, around the corner and out of sight, and they seemed to overlap each other. I pushed the kids into the recessed doorway of a tiny boutique, and actually had to wait for the thudding of my heart to subside before I could think straight.

Once it did, I could pick up the rumble of an engine up ahead, and best I could tell, it wasn't moving. I wanted to turn around and go the other way, but short of cutting through the woods, this was the most direct route home. I know a real survivalist would have been in the woods in the first place, but I wasn't, and I was scared I get turned around in them and get us lost.

I wasn't sure how far I'd have to go, so I had the kids follow me up to where the road curved out of sight and sent them into the tree cover while I kept going. Even though I had my gun in my hand, I felt completely stupid and ill-prepared, and with every moment that nothing else happened I got both more relaxed and more nervous, simultaneously. No, it doesn't make sense, but that's how I felt. I kept thinking that if there was something going on up ahead I would hear it, but the tension of just not knowing was going to give me hives.

Luckily, I didn't have to go far. Just around the corner I could spot an old pickup truck idling in the middle of the road. There was

no movement around it, and as I got a better view, I figured out why. Someone with no head left was lying on their back next to the driver's side. I never wished harder to unsee something, but it's still vivid in my mind, even days later. He (going on the appearance from the neck down) was obviously dead so I edged around the passenger side and peered in the open window. The driver was slumped down on the bench seat, his head lolling on his chest. Going by the blood and brain matter splattered on the seat and the back window, I guessed he was dead too. Looking back on this, I'm really surprised I had the presence of mind to come up with the plan I did. I'm even a little proud of myself. Grossed out, but proud.

I didn't see any more immediate threats, but I was guessing this all happened over some sort of botched truck-jacking attempt, and the engine was still running, sounding, I'm sure, like a rumbly siren call to anyone still hanging around stranded. I eased back around to the driver's side, and, trying not to look at either of the bodies very closely, pulled open the door. Holstering my gun, I grabbed the driver by his arm and pulled him around so I could get a better grip. Once I did, I yanked, expecting him to pull right out. He didn't. It took several more tugs before gravity took over and he dropped to the ground. At this point I was pretty disgusted, and very nervous about the noise, so when his feet got caught on the edge of the door frame, I just climbed over him into the truck and kicked at them until they gave up their hold.

Putting the truck into reverse, I back up quickly, pretending I didn't hear the dull thumps as the tires plowed over body parts. (I did wonder later why the driver had bothered to stop long enough to put the truck in park, though I'm glad he did, as the truck would have rolled who knows where). It only took me a second to back to the corner where I'd left the kids. Once there, I yelled at them to get in. I must have had my serious mommy voice on, because they didn't argue or complain, which was a minor miracle, given the state of the truck's interior. Within minutes we were headed forward again and I can tell you that I had ZERO intention of stopping for anyone, no matter how pitiful they looked. A nun holding an infant could have tried to flag me down and I'm pretty sure I would have pretended not to see her and just worried about hell later. That's how freaked I was at this point. Like I said, in hindsight, really surprised I had the state of mind to take the truck, but glad I did.

Now that we had transportation, and I wasn't worried about trivial things like traffic lights or speed limits, we made it home pretty fast. I may have hopped a few curbs and left some nasty scrapes down car sides, but I got us there. Thankfully, we didn't see any other people and I didn't have to make that nun versus hell decision.

Getting home was kind of anti-climatic. There were no barricades cordoning off the neighborhood entrance or roving patrols by the neighborhood watch, which, honestly, after the morning I'd had, I wouldn't have minded. We pulled into the driveway and I cut the engine, hoping my husband was home and would come out to meet us. He wasn't and he didn't. What did greet us were three slightly neurotic dogs and the stench of dog crap. I guess that's what happens when you lock them in the house for over twenty-four hours with no potty breaks. I sent one kids to let the dogs outside and open the windows and the other two to clean up the mess while I took stock.

My note for my husband was still on the table where I'd left it and everything appeared undisturbed. I was really expecting my husband to be here, but I wasn't giving up hope that he'd make it home. Let me stop for a minute and tell you about him. Owen's a big guy in his fifties with short grey hair and a goatee, until he gets mad and shaves everything off, which is often. He served as a submariner in the Navy in his youth and now ran a private detective agency. While he kept an office downtown, he could've been anywhere in this county or the next when the shit hit the fan. He had a bunch of hobbies, prepping being one of them. It was thanks to him I had the gun, and was at least reasonably familiar with it. It was also thanks to him I had a bug-out bag, as well as items stashed here and there around the house. Even living in suburbia, we'd managed to buy a rain barrel, build a rolling chicken tractor that housed six beautiful hens, and plant decent summer and winter gardens. I suppose since I'm trying to be honest I should point out that the rain barrel was upside down with weeds growing around it (we'd never installed it), and the garden was overgrown. The chickens were good though…I promise. Anyway, even at fifty-one, Owen was in great shape and had all the skills and knowledge he would need to get home. I refused to give up on him just yet. I, on the other hand, was a different story. I had made it home with three kids (only slightly traumatized), and one running vehicle (sorry, dead guy), and that was a start. Of course, about this time, with all the familiar surroundings of home around me, my adrenaline or whatever it is, wore off. I felt all nauseous and shaky and barely made it to the bathroom before getting sick.

I flushed (not even noticing at the time that the water didn't refill), called all the kids and dogs into the house, locked the doors, and climbed into bed, pulling the quilts over my head to wrap me in a safe little cocoon. I know…I know, not helpful at all. I knew that, but I still stayed that way for the better part of an hour. If it had just been me, I probably would have stayed there for much longer, maybe even forever, but having children who depend on you will get you moving

even when your own sense of self-preservation fails. So I got up, and started making plans.

First I decided that moving the ill-gotten truck out of sight was a good idea, and with the kids' help, I pulled it through the gate and wedged it in between the chicken coop and the house, where it would be hidden from the road. Then I hauled out the rain barrel, stuck it under the corner of the house, and attempted to fill it up with the water hose, which ran weakly for a couple of minutes before trickling to a stop. I stared at it, as if the power of my will could coax more water from its depths before dropping to it to the ground in a huff. Then I just stood there, completely at a loss. I was still standing there, lost in thought when, about five minutes later, my neighbor called out from over the fence.

Snapping out of my trance, I hurried across the yard and greeted Betty Tanner, whose yard shared about fifteen feet of fence with mine. She and her husband, Marvin had been some of the first to move into this neighborhood, back in the seventies, and I counted myself extremely lucky to have them as neighbors. They served as surrogate grandparents to the kids, since my parents lived in Ohio and Owen's were deceased.

"Ellie! I am so glad to see you and the kids home," she exclaimed. "I was worried to death! Do you have any idea what's going on?"

I was in the middle of assuring her that I most certainly did not know what was going on, when they boys appeared. I knew what was coming before they even opened their mouths. If you're reading this, and you have boys, then you do too.

"Mom," whined Jackson. (It is quite impressive how they can draw that out into three syllables, though they have yet to beat their sister's four). "What's for dinner? Can we go play at Sammy's (neighbor kid) until its ready?" Well that was easy enough to answer.

"I don't know, and no. Are you crazy?" I snapped. Of course, now they were looking at me like I'd disconnected their computer in the middle of a Minecraft session (which, I admit, I had done before). I said goodbye to Betty, telling her I'd be over later to check in on them, and followed the insatiable twins into the house. With the windows open, the air inside wasn't as stuffy and the stench had mostly dissipated. Rummaging through the cabinets, I was about to just go for peanut butter sandwiches when I realized that was dumb. I needed to use up the perishables first. Grabbing cheese and lunchmeat instead, I made some gourmet roll-ups (I put cream cheese in them, that's as gourmet as I get). The kids must have been worried I'd snap again, because no one said a word. It was about that time that someone knocked on the door.

Peeking through the peephole I recognized one of the renters from across the street. They were never my favorite people, unless you're into Jerry Springer type neighbors, which is probably why I didn't discourage Bane, my immense black Great Dane, when he hovered at the door, barking ferociously. I cracked the door, holding on to Bane's collar, as I took in his scruffy appearance. I was trying not to judge, because I'm pretty sure I didn't look so hot either.

"Yes?" He eyed the dog, shifting nervously before answering.

"Um. I just saw you guys pull up, and I was wondering, um, if I could borrow that truck. I need to go pick up my mom."

Now, I realize this was a reasonable enough request, but it was also one I had no intention of agreeing to.

"It's out of gas," I lied. "I barely got it around back. Sorry." I could tell he didn't really believe me, but Bane surged forward as I "accidentally" let my grip on his collar slip, and his eyes widened as he took several steps back.

"Um. Ok. Well, thanks anyway." He turned and left, checking over his shoulder several times on his way across the street. Closing and locking the door, I turned and offered Bane a pat on the head.

"Good dog." Of course, now I new he'd seen the truck, and while I was pretty sure there were easy ways to temporarily disable it, I didn't know them. I'm pretty sure I knew someone who would know though, and after a quick trip to Betty and Marvin's, I was the proud owner of one very used rotor button. He'd even shown me how to put everything back together, and I was optimistic that I could do it with few problems. Yea for problem solving. I was feeling pretty damn good until another problem smacked me in the face (metaphorically speaking).

"Mom," said Arnold, "We only have enough dog food for tonight." I'll admit there were several curse words that I'm pretty sure flew out of my mouth. How was I supposed to feed the dogs? Or the cats? Or the chickens? In addition to Bane, we had a Cocker Spaniel and a Labrador. It's not like we lived in the country and I could send them off to hunt bunnies. Well, I suppose the cats could continue their normal routine of dismembering small rodents and birds for fun and profit and just forgo their dry food, but what about the rest? Yeesh. After instructing Arnold to feed them half-rations for tonight, I headed off to the bathroom to think. (What? You don't think better there?) That's when I discovered the toilets wouldn't flush.

So, yeah, I peed outside behind the shed. Then with Kelly's help I sat up a little outhouse of sorts inside of it. It wasn't perfect, but it was the set up we occasionally used when we went camping, so I knew it would work for a little while. When finished, it looked ridiculous, but functional. A bedside commode was situated just to

the left of the door with a sheet hiding it from the rest of the shed (the sheet having been staple gunned to the rafters). Underneath the commode was a five gallon bucket lined with a trash bag. Next to it was an industrial sized bag of cheap kitty litter. The general idea was to cover your waste with a scoop of kitty litter, and when the bag got about half full (or disgusting), to bury it. At least we had plenty of toilet paper, though I was going to have to curb what Owen called my "tp addiction," since I knew more would be hard to come by. The rest of the day was spent with similar activities.

By the time dusk rolled around we had: drug out all the seldom used camping equipment (resulting in only one crazy spider web dance), populated the house with battery-powered lanterns and those tiny little fake flicker candles (some with cute little pumpkin faces on them…it was almost Halloween after all…and yes, I was still amazed that they worked….maybe because I never stored the batteries in anything? I don't know, and I wasn't questioning it), and made everyone pallets on the living room floor since nobody seemed inclined to sleep alone. For the end of the first day (well, second day I suppose, but first day home), I was pretty satisfied. I even felt good enough to start this journal. Poor naïve me. Maybe tomorrow I can sit down long enough to get you caught up to date, but for now, I'm ready for bed. Nite.

Ellie

October 29, 2015

Ok, so, the first night was uneventful. I admit, I was fully

expecting all manner of craziness, and even slept with my .22 next to my pillow (at this point I wasn't wearing it all the time yet) and a shotgun within arm's reach, but it didn't happen. The kids woke early (that could have had something to do with me encouraging the dogs to wake them) and ate cereal with the last of the milk. I wasn't completely sure the milk was still good, but it smelled ok, and nobody got sick, so it all worked out fine.

The way I saw it, we had a couple immediate needs: dog food and people food. I had almost none of the former, and only a few weeks supply of the latter, not enough in my opinion. I was a little worried about taking the kids out, and leaving the house unoccupied, but I didn't see any other options as I was NOT letting them out of my sight. I decided not only to put my gun back on my belt, but to arm both boys with .22 rifles. This decision really bothered me, as I didn't want them to be defenseless, but wasn't entirely sure they could be trusted with them. Don't get me wrong, they'd use them before, and certainly weren't idiots where gun safety was concerned, but they were still kids. At any rate, after letting Betty and Marvin know where we were going and making the truck operable again, we loaded up Bane (he had proved useful yesterday as a deterrent, so we elected to take him) and headed out. Let me say that the truck cab was not made to hold one adult, three kids, and a monster dog.

My general plan was to head to the Tractor Supply first; they usually had plenty of animal food and I was hoping they hadn't been looted. If that went well, I was going to try the fruit stand down the road. I was hoping most people wouldn't bother with it, not realizing that beyond the perishable fruits and veggies, they also carried all manner of boxed and canned goods. The drive went well. We saw several people out in the neighborhood, most just waved. Outside the neighborhood it was only a short drive on back roads, once of which deposited us at the back door of the TSC.

Pulling the truck as close to the back door as I could get, I turned off the ignition, removed the rotor button, and motioned the kids to join me. Figuring I would try the obvious way first, I pulled on the back door, almost falling over backwards when it opened easily. It was dark and quiet inside, and I called out shakily before stepping inside and motioning the kids in after me.

"Hello. Is anyone here? Don't mind us…just need some dog food." Yeah, I felt stupid saying it too. So imagine my surprise when a face peeked around the corner of the garbage can aisle at me. I jumped, the kids jumped, the face jumped. I imagine we all looked pretty comical.

The face belonged to a young woman, probably no more than twenty, still wearing her red vest and TSC name tag.

"Hi there. I'm Ellie. We were just hoping to pick up some dog food, if that's ok?" Her eyes traveled back and forth between me and the kids before speaking.

"You're the first people I've seen since the power went out. All the other employees left." She looked over at the door we'd entered. "We locked the front doors, but I guess someone forgot to lock that one," she said sheepishly. "I don't suppose….do you have…I mean…..Do you have a car that works?"

Eyeing her warily, and deciding she wasn't much of a threat, I nodded.

"Can you, please, take me home? I don't live far." After getting her address and discovering she lived in the back of my neighborhood (go figure), I agreed, as long as she didn't mind riding in the back with the dog food. She didn't, and with her help, we were able to load about two hundred pounds each of dog food and chicken feed, about eighty pounds of cat food, several bags of scratch and dried mealworms, which I joked were excellent sources of protein, and much to my delight, lots of snack food made for people too. With no objections from our new passenger, I made a stop at the fruit stand, but after a quick glance at the broken widows, gaping front doors, and overturned shelves, I decided it was best to keep moving. I was a bit amazed. I mean, why plunder (good word….plunder) a fruit stand but not a farm store? It was just weird.

Shaking off my thoughts, I headed towards home, stopping in a driveway only two streets over from mine to drop off our passenger to who appeared to be her very grateful mother. Stopping in our driveway just long enough so Kelly could open the gate for me, I pulled the truck back into its previous spot, removed the rotor button (I was getting good at that) and then spent an exhausting half hour moving all the feed onto our covered back porch.

I was ready to curl up with a book and a tall glass of lemonade, which, of course, didn't happen. Instead I pulled out the charcoal grill and prepared to cook the rest of the meat in the freezer, cursing myself the whole time for never ordering that pressure canning equipment. I learned how to preserve growing up in rural Ohio, and I even had everything I needed to process using the water bath method, but preserving meats and some vegetables safely required tools I didn't own. With any luck, I'd be able to procure some eventually, but it looked like we'd be inviting Betty and Marvin over for dinner tonight, as I wasn't even sure my little vacuum cleaners could consume everything that would be lost if not cooked right away.

The kids amused themselves by practicing their bow and arrows on a target in the backyard (Owen had bought them all fiberglass recurves last Christmas), and while I was sure they wouldn't

be bagging us any dinner just yet, the alternative method of hunting and defense just might come in handy.

Dinner that evening was quite pleasant. We were not only joined by Betty and Marvin, but another neighbor, Annabelle Granger, whose house sat on the corner between ours and theirs, joined us as well. Betty, quite unnecessarily, brought a large pot of squirrel stew, while Annabelle showed up toting large containers of melting ice cream. The kids showed no aversion to either (surprising on the stew, not so much on the ice cream). In fact, the boys were so psyched by the idea of making stew from the squirrels scampering about the yard (something Marvin had apparently been doing for years) that I agreed to let him teach them how to catch and skin them. Kelly, in typical teenage girl fashion, declined, but the smug look on her face disappeared when I informed her that she'd be joining me in learning different ways to prepare them from Betty. Bet she wasn't expecting that.

Sometime during our conversation, I wondered out loud why no one had attempted to organize the neighborhood yet. It took me a few seconds of their sly grins before I caught on.

"You want me to organize us?" I asked incredulously.

"Sure, why not," Betty asked, shrugging her shoulders.

"Well, you know more people. I think they'd respond better if it was you or Marvin."

"How about we do it together then?" Laughing, I agreed, and that is how the Post-Apocalyptic Integrated Neighborhood Survivalists were born. Ok....I'm kidding, no one calls it that. I just made that up so it'd have the acronym PAINS. Mostly everyone just says the Neighborhood Group, but that's boring, so I fixed it.

Ellie

October 30, 2015

Ok, so by now you've probably figured out that I started this journal (which is, I should mention, contained in a sparkly unicorn spiral notebook left over from when my daughter was in grade school) the day I arrived back home with the kids, which was the day after

the apocalypse (or whatever you're calling it). I've been trying desperately to get you caught up, but I'm beginning to doubt that's ever going to happen. Today is the day before Halloween, or Day 6, and I've only written up to the end of the third night. Ugh. I'm tempted to hurry up and skip ahead, but I don't want to miss anything important, and you just never know what will be important to different people.

So, where were we? Oh yes, PAINS. Betty and Annabelle (who was a very quiet person, but knew everything about everyone in the neighborhood) thought we should try and meet the following evening, and said they would handle getting the word out. This sounded good to me, and we parted ways. I went to bed feeling all proactive and productive and all those good p-words again. Of course, I woke up at Zero Dark Thirty (as in, I don't know what time it was because the clocks don't work) confused and cranky. Bane and the other two dogs (oh, ok…their names are Callista and Sir Barkypants, don't judge me) were barking up a storm at the back window. I must have been half asleep because I just assumed they had to go outside to pee and let them out without even thinking about it.

They tore off towards the truck and I heard a girly scream and a clunk as the truck door slammed shut. More awake now, I grabbed my gun and went to see what was going on. There was enough moon to see by, and as soon as I rounded the corner I knew what had happened. The idiot from across the street was sitting in the truck cab, a panicked look on his face. What a moron. Maybe I deserved it for taking the truck out after lying and telling him there wasn't any gas, but really? Who tries to steal a truck from the backyard of someone with very large dogs? Looking closer, I saw he was actually crying. I was willing to bet he'd pissed himself too, hopefully not in the truck seat, though.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Campbell," he sobbed. "I just really wanted to borrow the truck. Nobody's come home yet, and I wanted to go pick up my girlfriend."

I might have felt sorrier for him if he'd stuck with the "picking up mom" story from the first time. I can't say I didn't have any empathy for him, because I did, but I didn't trust him enough to loan him a shovel, much less the only transportation I had. Grabbing Bane's collar in one hand, I told him to get out and go home, figuring he could get past the other two dogs on his own; they'd just lick him to death anyway. I realize if I was the stoic heroine in most of those books I used to read (used too…..hmph….like last week), I'd just shoot him, and then I'd never have to worry about him bothering me again. But I wasn't, and this kid wasn't a marauding rapist. He was just a teenager, albeit a dumb one. I did warn him as he left,

however, that this was his second strike, and to not try me a third time. He eyed the gun and the dog, gulped noisily, and assured me he wouldn't. So far, so good. I guess we'll see.

I never was able to go back to sleep, which made me cranky the rest of the day. The kids and I spent the day weeding the garden, shifting stuff around in the house so we could store the dog food inside, burying waste bags, and playing board games. I felt like I should be doing something useful, but I just wasn't desperate enough to head out looking for more supplies. We were on the outskirts of town, which I was figuring was keeping us as quiet as we were, and I had no desire to go looking for trouble.

I was getting more and more worried about Owen, but wasn't giving up on him yet. By that evening, when time for the meeting rolled around, I was edgy and didn't really want to go. I went anyway, of course, but it turned out it didn't matter, as only five other households showed up. Well, seven if you count Annabelle and Betty. According to them, nobody answered at most of the homes, and four were empty. We had met in Annabelle's front yard, and out of those who did show up, we had two sets of retirees, a school bus driver, a sheriff's deputy, and the owner of a pool supply company.

I admit it. I was way more excited about the deputy than all the rest put together. Pretty much all we did for the first few minutes was introduce ourselves and talk about how we needed to do something. That got old real quick. Even the deputy, who I expected to take charge, was quiet. He did seem kind of young though. I finally spoke up and recommended pushing some disabled cars across the front and back entrances to the neighborhood. Everyone seemed agreeable enough to this, so I volunteered my kids, and bus driver lady offered up her two teenage sons to help.

With one thing accomplished, I brought up a guard station, but no one seemed willing to man it. The most anyone would agree to was to keep an eye out. I thought this seemed pointless, and finally managed to get bus driver lady (I'm sorry, her name was Christine) to have her sons watch the front entrance from her house (they lived closest to the front) and run to alert the next house (pool supply guy….um, Steven) if they saw anything odd.

The last thing brought up was the truck. I knew it was coming. I really didn't want to share, but as it wasn't technically mine in the first place, I conceded. The deputy (Aaron) wanted to go get his wife, who was a teacher at the high school, Christine wanted to find her husband, and one of the sets of retirees (Jack and Evelyn) seemed quite worried about their adult children. The other couple (David and Caroline) just looked bored.

They agreed to draw straws to see who would go first, and I

sent Arnold home to grab some. The deputy won, and said he'd be by to pick up the truck after they put the barricade in place. I was sad to see it leave, but at least I didn't have to worry about Idiot Kid from across the street trying to steal it again. I knew that the barricade, the watch….all of it really, wouldn't do any good at all if someone really wanted to cause trouble. I was hoping, though, that it would at least deter anyone just wandering through, or teenagers looking for an easy spot to vandalize. Most of all, I suppose, it made us feel useful, like we had some say in what was happening, even if we really didn't.

The next night was quiet too, and I was getting a little complacent. It's amazing how fast the horror of the trip home had faded. Not completely, mind you. I was still on my guard. I had taken to wearing my gun all the time after the Idiot Boy incident, and the shotgun was never far away. Both boys were proving responsible with their rifles, and even Kelly had a small hatchet threaded through her belt, although she may have just been doing that because she thought it looked cool, hard to say with teenagers.

The boys spent most of the day with Marvin, practicing hitting squirrels with the slingshot, while Kelly helped me set out buckets under the eaves. The sky was promising rain, and I was getting a bit nervous about our water situation, as we were fast running through my stored supply. I knew there was a creek about half a mile away, but walking there and back carting water, then having to boil it first, was my last resort. I was hoping we'd get a good rain and the rain barrel, with these extra buckets, would keep us going a bit longer.

Betty kept us updated over the back fence as the deputy left, returned with his wife, and handed off the truck to bus driver lady. Crap….sorry….I mean Aaron and Christine. I don't know why I can't remember to use their names. Christine (see, I can do it!) sputtered back in a couple hours later, distraught. Apparently, she was unable to locate her husband. She said she'd driven all over looking for him, and almost had to run over someone who'd been trying to take the truck.

Now, while I did feel bad for her (I was missing my husband too) I was a little peeved. She'd managed to almost get our truck stolen and had managed to run the gas tank down to fumes. I'm surprised she even made it back. This, of course, meant that Jack and Evelyn would not be going out looking for their missing family until we'd siphoned some more gas.

We had plenty of cars to choose from, but since it was getting late Jack said he'd rather wait until morning. All in all, this was probably our quietest day to date. That night, however, was the first one I heard gunshots since the first night at the school. They weren't real close, but they made me (and the kids, and the dogs) extremely

nervous. We were still all sleeping in the living room at this point, and fell asleep to the pattering of rain on the roof. I'm pretty sure I was actually smiling as I fell asleep (over the rain,, not the gunshots).

It was still raining the next morning, and we all grabbed umbrellas to go take care of what was quickly becoming our morning routine. We gathered eggs, cut some spinach from the garden, and emptied the rain buckets into plastic storage containers. I'd been cooking our morning eggs and spinach on the grill, and let me tell you, I burned I don't know how many before I got the hang of a cast iron frying pan on a grill. It's not as easy as you think. I emptied the bag of charcoal into the grill and sighed; it was the last one, looked like we'd be converting to wood-burning after this. It was still raining, so I left the grill on the covered back porch. Unfortunately, I'd left the back door open and the smoke as I lit the charcoal billowed out and filled the house. It took all damn day to air that out. At least I didn't burn the eggs. At least we had eggs.

Jack and Evelyn left that morning in search of the children. Sadly, they, and our truck, never returned. We never found out what happened. I guess I'd like to imagine that they found their kids and they're all living happily ever after somewhere. It could happen.

Dinner was pasta with squirrel, with watery pudding for dessert. Don't knock it until you've tried it. I was just glad I went pasta crazy last time the grocery store had it buy one, get one, since it seemed to be our staple lately. This was also the day the laundry got so bad the kids even noticed it. Since I wasn't willing to waste the water, I suggested they hang everything outside to air out. Kelly located a bottle of Febreeze and the boys made a nifty clothesline out of paracord. The clothes may have not been clean exactly, but at least they smelled better. Too bad we couldn't do that with the dishes. We'd been using the smallest amount of water we could and rinsing them off. I never thought the day would come that I would wish desperately for a washing machine and dishwasher, yet here it was. I suppose it could have been worse. We'd had no looters, thugs, or vandals. We had food and water. I knew that this place wasn't going to cut it for long term survival, but I was determined to hold out as long as I could, waiting on Owen. Every night I told myself that tomorrow could be the day; the day he came home.

Ellie

October 31, 2015

Halloween. All Hallow's Eve. Day of the Dead. Samhain. Whatever name you call it, it was here. It was also the best day I'd ever had. Why? BECAUSE TODAY WAS THE DAY!! Yes, I know I'm yelling. Get over it. Do you know what that means? OWEN CAME HOME!!

I was in the backyard scrambling eggs and grilling squirrel, chatting with Betty and Marvin when I heard the kids squealing from inside. I dropped the spatula and ran inside, scared to death of what I'd find, when I realized they were happy squeals. I stepped into the living room and I swear my knees went weak. Owen, dirt-covered, smelly, scratched up, wonderful Owen, stood in the front door, three little monkeys (i.e. kids) clinging to him. I don't think they even let go as he crossed the room and threw his arms around me. I was smiling like a crazy person and as I clung to him, I didn't even care that he smelled like a combination of dead animal and car air freshener.

We probably would have stayed like that for quite some time if the quiet sniff behind us hadn't reminded me that I had guests (if you could call them that at this point). I turned, grinning, and threw myself into Betty's arms.

"Oh, no you don't," Betty said, pushing me away. "I could smell him from the backyard, and now you don't smell any better. I think it's time to try out that shower Marvin's been working on."

Owen laughed; a deep rolling laugh that I'd always loved. "Certainly Mrs. Betty, lead the way." It turns out that Marvin had been hard at work fashioning a shower of sorts out of a fifty gallon drum and back porch decking. He'd even manage to fix it so the water drained back into a storage container for re-use. Of course, he'd run out of lumber, so you had to sit down to shower, and it was absolutely freezing, but being clean was great. I didn't even realize how disgusting I'd gotten until I wasn't. After Owen and I went, the kids even braved the icy water, taking what was, I'm sure, the shortest showers in human history.

Once we were clean, we sat down to cold eggs and squirrel (thanks to Marvin, they weren't burned). The kids began talking, getting louder and louder, each trying to talk over the other. After what he deemed an appropriate time spent listening to them (longer than I would have), he sent them to start a bonfire, for no other reason than to keep them busy, I'm assuming.

Looking around at me, Betty, and Marvin, he sobered. "It's getting bad out there guys. I was stuck across the Bay in Foley when everything quit, and the city is out of control. Honestly, I'm surprised it hasn't reached you yet, but it won't be long."

"What should we do?" Betty asked quietly.

"We need to leave. I don't know what our destination would be yet, but we can't stay here. The middle of nowhere would be good."

Marvin, usually silent, spoke up. "You know, Owen, my parents owned an old cabin outside Jackson, in a place called Carlton. You can't get more 'middle of nowhere' than that. It's not in the best shape, but when I ran up there in April to check on everything, it was still standing. If you're open to the idea of traveling together, I think it'd make us a good as destination as any."

So, that's how we decided to leave. As it turns out, we don't have to even walk. Owen came home in an old pickup truck, almost identical to the one we lost (it wasn't the same one, I checked). Betty and Marvin have an old trailer and we spent the rest of the day packing everything we could fit. I'm glad the dogs like each other, as they will all riding inside one large kennel in the back, as will the kids and I (the back, not the kennel). I wish we had a second vehicle, but don't worry…..I've learned in the past week how to count my blessings. We're leaving in the morning, which seems kind of fitting, as in some faiths November 1st is the start of a new year. This journal is pretty much full now, but I'm carrying it with me anyway. Who knows, maybe for my next one I'll find something more fitting for an adventure…..maybe Naruto?

Ellie